George Washington in West Virginia*

By Leona Gwinn Brown

Today's traveler in the Ohio Valley sees in its broad river bottoms a vast panorama of industry. The landscape is a series of sprawling factories, whose proud smokestacks seem to typify the greatness of the names for which they stand: names such as Olin Revere, Kaiser Aluminum, DuPont, Koppers, Westinghouse, American Cyanamid, and Carborundum. For the Ohio Valley's rich resources, its salt deposits, its abundant water, level land, and above all its reserves of labor, are now bringing West Virginia to her rightful place in the nation's economy.

Two industries which have come to the Ohio Valley in recent years are of especial interest to West Virginians. One of these is Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation's giant sheet aluminum plant at Ravenswood. The other is Carborundum Metals Company's plant at Parkersburg, which will produce zirconium and hafnium, vital in the manufacture of atomic reactors. These two plants are of historical as well as future interest. The town of Ravenswood, now growing beyond the wildest dreams of its citizens, lies on land that once was owned by George Washington. At Parkersburg, on the land known as Washington's Bottom, a giant oak, which has stood since Washington's day, may be felled to make way for the buildings of Carborundum.

How different was the Ohio Valley when George Washington, with his friends, Doctor James Craik and William Crawford, and their servants first visited it in the autumn of 1770. There was no sound of industry; the stillness was broken only by the splash of water against the canoes, the calls of birds or animals in the forest, the voices of the men in the canoes, or the occasional burst of fire from one of the guns as they hunted the plentiful game along the shore. The travelers must have exclaimed at the beauty of the virgin forest, now, in October, at the peak of its autumn glory. The river, as yet unhampered by floodwalls, dams, and locks, must have presented an ever-changing vista of beauty as they traveled down it.

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George Washington was unaware of many of the resources of the land he saw on either side of the river—the oil and natural gas, the coal under the hills to the East, and the salt wells so important to industry today. But he was impressed by the richness of the forests and the fertile bottom lands. In an advertisement in the Virginia *Gazette*, the Maryland *Journal*, and the Baltimore *Advertiser* of August 20, 1773, he describes these lands in the following glowing terms:

> As these lands are among the first which have been surveyed in the part of the country they lie in, it is almost needless to premise that none can exceed them in luxuriance of soil, or convenience of situation, all of them lying upon the banks either of the Ohio or Kanawha, and abounding with fine fish and wild fowl of various kind, as also in most excellent meadows, many of them (by the bountiful hand of nature) are, in their present state, almost fit for the scythe.

The purpose of this advertisement was to attract settlers to his lands along the Ohio and Kanawha. He acquired over twenty thousand acres of land along these rivers.

The country west of the mountains had interested George Washington since the time when, as a lad of sixteen and the protege of Lord Fairfax, he had been allowed to accompany a surveying party, which was attempting to fix the boundaries of the Fairfax lands, across the mountains into what is now West Virginia. Here the young Virginia gentleman had his first contact with the frontier. The frontier settlers were, for the most part, a rough and uncultured breed. Often they had left extreme poverty in Europe, and were proud and happy to have even a rough cabin of their own. Their customs were adapted to frontier conditions, where there were no luxuries and few comforts. To the son of a wealthy plantation owner, their ways seemed strange indeed, and it is amusing and enlightening to read young George's account of his adventures in his own words:

> We got our supper and was lighted into a room and I not being so good a Woodsman as ye rest of my Company striped myself very orderly and went in to ye Bed as they called it when to my Surprize I found it to be nothing but a Little Straw matted together without sheets or anything else but only one thread Bear blanket with double its weight of Vermin such as Lice, Fleas, &. I was glad to get up (as soon as ye Light was carried from us) I put on my Cloths and lay as my Companions. Had

> we not been very tired I am sure we should not have slep'd much that night I made a promise not to Sleep so from that time forward chusing rather to sleep in y. open air before a fire as will appear hereafter.

Two days after George wrote this in his diary, he recorded that they had reached Frederick town and that he had bathed himself, thus getting "Rid of y. game we had catched y. night before." Then in November, 1749, he reveals in a letter another picture of frontier life, as follows:

> since you receide my letter in October Last I have not sleeped above three Nights or four in a bed but after walking a good deal all the Day lay down before the fire upon a Little Hay Straw Fodder or bairskin whichever is to be had with Man Wife and Children like a Parcel of Dogs or Catts and happy's he that gets the Birth nearest the fire.

George Washington was later to learn the ways of the frontier and to respect the hardy, though uncultured people of West Augusta (for so this section of Virginia was called in those days), and, as a mature man, a general who had observed their bravery in the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, is reported to have said: "Leave me but a banner to place upon the mountains of Augusta, and I will rally round me the men who will lift our bleeding country from the dust, and set her free!"

On February 19, 1754, Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia issued a proclamation promising that two hundred thousand acres of land along the Ohio River would be laid off and granted to those men who would enlist in the army and help to defend the frontier. After the close of the war, George Washington was visited almost daily by men who had served under him and who looked to him, as their former commander, to help them claim the land which had been promised in the proclamation. The execution of the terms of the proclamation, and the actual granting of the lands, was now opposed by many interests, among them the British government, the Virginia Assembly, and various land companies which hoped to gain title to the lands. George Washington was interested in helping the former soldiers claim their lands, and hoped also to attain some of them for himself, for he was a forward-looking business man, and had heard from various travelers returning from the West of the richness of the lands.

Two letters, one from George Washington to his friend William Crawford, September 21, 1767, and the other to his brother Charles, January 31, 1770, reveal his personal interest in obtaining these lands. Some modern historians, chiefly on the basis of these letters, have criticized him for his activities in acquiring such large quantities of land, calling him a speculator and "land-grabber." But Washington, who was a good manager and a successful farmer, saw that if these lands were cut up into small parcels and distributed to people who might have very little interest in developing them, much of their great value would be dissipated. Therefore, as he wrote to Edward Graham in 1798, he "bought and exchanged until I got entire tracts to myself". He explains in the same letter that the "burthen" of obtaining these lands under the proclamation of 1754 "were thrown upon me nor have the latter been reimbursed to this day". He did not obtain his lands dishonestly, but, as he says, bought and exchanged, and any of the officers and men who had claims to the land might have done the same, had they so desired. The ability to strike a bargain, to look to the future and to "buy cheap and sell high" has never been in disrepute in the American society; in fact, it has contributed to the wealth of the country, where it has been rightly used.

George Washington believed in developing his land to the full. He was among the first of the "gentleman farmers" of Virginia to put into practice the more modern farming methods, such as crop rotation and the use of animal manures, clover, and crushed limestone on the Mount Vernon estate. Had he not been prevented by the events of history, it is fairly certain that he would have developed his western lands "to an extensive public benefit, as well as private advantage." If George Washington's plans had been carried out, the whole history of West Virginia might have been different.

Because of his interest in the western lands, George Washington, in October, 1770, began his trip to the Ohio Valley. His friend, Doctor Craik, went with him, and they stopped at the home of William Crawford, who had served with Washington in the French and Indian War. Crawford joined the party, and they continued over General Braddock's Road to Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh). Here, at the home of Colonel George Croghan, Washington met the White Mingo, a chief of the Six Nations,

who welcomed him to the West and presented him with a string of wampum as evidence of good faith and friendship.

On Saturday, October 20, the party embarked in canoes and began the journey down the Ohio River. Undismayed at the reports they heard at Mingo Town, an Indian town on the Ohio side of the river, that two traders had been killed by Indians some miles below, they continued past "Weeling on Split Island Creek," which passes through present day Wheeling, West Virginia. Some miles below they passed through another Indian village, where they learned that the traders had not been killed by Indians, but had drowned attempting to cross the river.

Fortunately for posterity, George Washington kept careful diaries of all his travels, and on this tour of the Ohio he prepared a "table of distances" which makes it very easy for historians to follow his journey and connect the places mentioned in his accounts to the locations of present towns and cities.

At the mouth of Pond Creek, the party stopped so that Washington might pay his respects to Kiashuta, a chief of the Six Nations, who had accompanied Washington on his mission to the French in 1753, and whose people were now encamped here. The Indians put on such an elaborate ceremony for the benefit of the travelers that they were delayed here for several days.

On October 31, the party reached the junction of the Ohio and the Great Kanawha. The next day they went about ten miles up the Kanawha; the next, about four miles further. They were now a mile above the mouth of Fourteen Mile Creek, about forty-six miles below the present site of Charleston, West Virginia. About this country, now so densely populated, Washington wrote:

> This country abounds in Buffalo and wild game of all kinds, as also in all kinds of wild fowl, there being in the bottom a great many small grassy ponds or lakes which are full of swan, geese, and ducks. Some of our people went up the river four or five miles higher, and found the same kind of bottom on the west side and we were told by the Indians that it continued up to the Falls, which they judged to be 50 or 60 miles higher up.

Here the party camped for the night. The next day they turned back downstream. At the river's mouth, Washington

began to mark out the lands he hoped to attain, describing them as follows:

> We set off down the river on our return homewards and encamped at the mouth; at the beginning of the bottom above the junction of the Rivers and at the mouth of a branch of the East side I marked two Maples, and an Elm and Hoopwood tree as a corner of the soldiers land (if we can get it) intending to take all the bottom from hence to the rapids in the Great Bend into one survey—I also marked at the mouth of another Gut lower down the west side (at the lower part of the long bottom) an Ash and Hoopwood for the beginning of another of the Soldiers Survey to extend up so as to include all the bottom (in a body) on the west side.

On Sunday, November 4, the party began the long journey up the Ohio. Traveling up the river was somewhat more difficult than coming down. The Ohio was swollen by rains, and progress was so slow that they sent an Indian on ahead to arrange to have horses ready for them at Mingo Town, so that they could continue on to Pittsburgh by land. After a long journey with many delays, Washington finally reached Mount Vernon. His trip to the Ohio Valley had taken nine weeks and one day.

George Washington planned to return to the Ohio Valley in 1773, to begin the actual surveying of the lands. This year, however, was one of sadness at Mount Vernon. Martha Washington's daughter, whom George Washington affectionately called "Patcy," died during the summer of that year. Captain Crawford went on to survey the western lands, hoping that Washington would join him later.

In 1774 Crawford wrote: "We have built you a house on your land opposite the mouth of Hocking." George Washington never lived in this house; but a man named Lewis later bought the tract of land and found on it a cabin, presumed to be the house to which Crawford referred. This cabin was still standing at the close of the Civil War. The tract of land which Crawford cleared here is still called Washington's Bottom. On exhibition in the collection of the Daughters of the Pioneers in Parkersburg is a section of a tree blazed by William Crawford in marking off this land.

James Cleveland, an employee of George Washington, was sent with a group of indentured servants, in 1775, to build a

settlement on Washington's land near the junction of the Ohio and Great Kanawha Rivers. Cleveland built several cabins and planted "near 2000 peach stone cornols" on the land, despite the great difficulties he faced. The servants he took with him were "the porest set of hands I ever saw." Perhaps these men, who had agreed to voluntary servitude to pay their passage to America, saw at least a chance for freedom; perhaps they were badly treated by Cleveland; perhaps they preferred to take their chances in the forest rather than starve, for they had lost some of their provisions on the way down the river and food was in short supply. They continually tried to escape, and poor Mr. Cleveland's time was taken up with pursuing the servants, rather than with hunting or clearing the land. In desperation he wrote: "I am building a house to lock them in of nights as there is no other way to keep them till you come out and see what is to be done." He repeatedly begged George Washington to come in person to supervise the settlement "if the affares of America" would permit.

"The affares of America" did not permit. In 1775, the Second Continental Congress asked George Washington to take full command of the forces to defend the colonies, and from that time until the Revolution ended he had very little time for personal interests. The George Washington who was respected even by Indians, who was able to train ragged frontiersmen into an army strong enough to face the British, and who was able to keep a force of men together even through the terrible winter at Valley Forge, might have been able to persuade Cleveland's "redemptioners" to stay and work out their own salvation on the land. If he had, West Virginia's development might have begun at a much earlier date. But that is only a matter of conjecture.

In addition to his hope for the settlement and development of the West, George Washington had another dream which, if it had been fulfilled, would have had a tremendous effect on the history of the state. He hoped that East and West could be bound together by an inland waterway connecting the Potomac with the Ohio, and perhaps extending even to the Great Lakes. Such a waterway would have directed trade from the West toward the East, rather than toward the Mississippi.

It was to investigate the possibility of such a canal that Washington, in 1784, again visited what is now West Virginia. Accompanied by Doctor Craik, he set out up the Potomac. At Berkeley Springs, his diary reveals, he "was showed the Model of a Boat constructed by the ingenious Mr. Rumsey, for ascending rapid currents by mechanism." This must have been encouraging to one interested in transportation on the inland rivers.

The travelers had originally intended to re-visit the Ohio Valley on this trip, but at Simpson's, on the Youghiogheny, they heard rumors of fresh Indian troubles on the Ohio and Great Kanawha, and so decided to return home. But George Washington believed there was some possibility that the Potomac might be connected, by means of a canal, with the Cheat River or the Monongahela. Therefore they turned southward from Beason Town (now Uniontown, Pennsylvania) and camped that night at the mouth of the Cheat. Next morning they went to the home of the Monongalia County (Virginia) surveyor, Samuel Hathaway, on Pierpoint's Hill, about five miles from Morgantown. Here he met Zackquill Morgan, the son of one of the first settlers of this section. He discussed with Morgan his hopes for connecting the Cheat with the Potomac; but he learned that the Cheat was obstructed beyond Dunkard Bottom, and that navigation would not be practicable.

Washington and Doctor Craik then re-crossed the Cheat and rode across Cheat Mountain to Bruceton Mills. From here they turned Southeast, stopping on the North and South Branches of the Potomac to visit Abraham Hite, Colonel John Neville, and others, and finally returning to Mount Vernon. George Washington's dream of a canal was also to go unfulfilled. As President of the United States, he was soon to be concerned with more pressing matters.

The frontier of George Washington's day has long since moved on. No longer are the virgin forests, the serene, untraveled rivers, the vast stretches of uninhabited land a part of the West Virginia scene. Those who came after George Washington were often not so wise as he in the management of their possessions. Too often West Virginia's forests have been recklessly cut and burned over, the forest animals needlessly

slaughtered. For too many years much of the formerly fertile land has been carelessly or ignorantly farmed, leaving it worn and useless. Too often West Virginia's wealth of natural resources has been exploited by those who gave nothing in return to the state from which their profits were taken. Too many of West Virginia's people, unwilling, like James Cleveland's "redemptioners," to stay and work for their own good and that of the state, have gone where the prospects are brighter.

Although the wilderness frontier has vanished, other frontiers remain for West Virginians to conquer. There are frontiers in industry: new industries to be attracted to the state which will build security for the people and develop the areas where they build, as Kaiser Aluminum is doing at Ravenswood. There are frontiers in science: new uses to be discovered for West Virginia's natural resources. Such work is now in progress at the Appalachian Experiment Station of the United States Bureau of Mines, near Morgantown. There are frontiers in education: children to be trained for future citizenship. There are frontiers in agriculture: the land and forests may still be managed to produce goods and foodstuffs for the nation.

In the last analysis, the development of all these frontiers depends now, as it did in Washington's day, upon the people. West Virginia needs her teachers, her miners, her scientists, her engineers, her businessmen, her farmers—all those who have something to contribute to and something to gain from the state. If the qualities exhibited by George Washington—a shrewd business sense, good management, civic responsibility, self-respect, leadership, and faith in the future—still exist in the character of the people of West Virginia, her problems can be solved, and she will continue to rise in prestige and pride to become a leader among the states.